

# The Blue Man: Class reunion

In the late '60s, film fever was just catching on with the college set. At that time, though, the avant-garde student wanted to be a novelist, not a filmmaker.

By the 1971-1972 academic year, the American Film Institute reported 4,619 students majoring in film at the undergraduate level of 427 schools surveyed.

By 1980 the number of students had jumped to 41,000 enrolled in the U.S.'s 1,067 film schools. And the majority of these students wanted to become filmmakers.

In Canada, the 1973-1974 Guide to Film and TV courses in Canada, published by the Canadian Film Institute, listed 146 pages of courses representing 87 schools. This past year the totals included communications studies and filled 202 pages with courses.

Filmmaking is now offered across the curriculum from elementary school to university. During the early '70s students applied to film school with vague notions as to what they wanted to do. Today, the competition is fierce. According to Leslie Beeskei, admissions officer at Concordia University, they receive about 300 applications each year for the cinema major and accept only 70 annually into the program. Communications studies applicants at Concordia totalled 400, with 120 admitted this year.

So it is not surprising that suddenly, with the increasing attention on film-school students gone professional, such as Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas, Martin Scorsese, and Joel Coen (*Blood Simple*), former film-school students would monopolize a Canadian feature film production.

Such is the case with *The Blue Man*, a co-venture between Filmline International and New Century Productions, Ltd., Beverly Hills, California, a feature about the power of the human mind, (including out-of-body travel).

"Close to one half of the crew is composed of former film school students," says director George Mihalka, himself a former film-production student at Concordia University.

But Pieter Kroonenburg, producer of *The Blue Man*, insists that the overwhelming number of former film students on this production is mere coincidence.

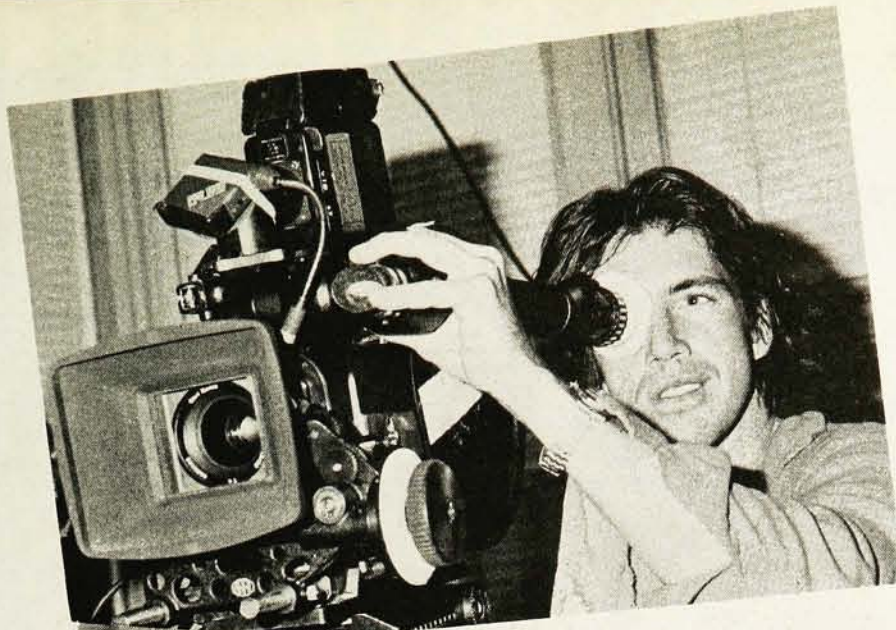
Today there seems to be too many film-school graduates to deny that they are a contending factor. Former students are everywhere and are filling key jobs on every production.

Back in the days when Buck Houghton, of New Century Productions, Ltd., started in film, he began working in the mail room. Houghton was a mail boy at Paramount before he moved up to budget officer and then story editor at RKO. Finally, Howard Hughes bought RKO and kicked everyone out.

"The first thing I learned was that the names on the office doors had rings on them so that they could be removed easily," Houghton laughs.

He went on to produce Rod Sterling's *The Twilight Zone*.

The system of apprenticeship may be influenced by who you know or merely by persistence, but when it comes right



Photos: Lois Siegel

- Operator Christian Duguay looks through a camera bigger than the Bolex of his student days
- Several "pizzas" later... director George Mihalka

down to it, you'd better be talented and willing to work very hard.

George Mihalka received his degree in literature, not in cinema, but he did take film courses at Concordia, while teaching literature on the side. "I was using visuals to explain literature — using pictures to teach words. But I had dreams of making films," he explains.

While at school Mihalka met cameraman Rodney Gibbons in a philosophy course. They often cut class to have intellectual discussions at a nearby tavern, and soon were making films together.

"Those were the days when you'd make little 16mm films. You'd have five or six guys rooming together in a two-bedroom apartment, living on mattresses in some dingy basement. We were always perfectly happy.

"In 1976 we made *Pizza to Go*, a 25-minute, 16mm film for \$9,000 cash."

To support their film habit, Mihalka taught school, and Gibbons joined the National Film Board as an assistant cameraman.

"While other people were buying stereos, we spent money on films," Mihalka says proudly.

After film school, Mihalka directed *Pinball Summer* (1979), followed by *My Bloody Valentine* and *Scandale*.

"Concordia was not a trade school. I don't feel you can learn composition by pulling a tape measure. Unless you are a

natural film genius, if you don't go to film school, you don't get the aesthetic part of your training," Mihalka insists.

He credits his teacher André Herman with pointing him in the right direction. Herman had told him quite simply, "If you want to direct, there's only one way to learn; that's by directing."

Assisting Mihalka on *The Blue Man* are former Concordia students Christian Duguay, camera operator; Luc Campeau, production manager; Mike Williams, 1st A.D.; Donna Noonan, props buyer; Piroshka Mihalka, stills; Steve Hunt, electrician; and André Guimond, art department production assistant.

Jeff Bessner, unit manager, graduated from Simon Fraser, majoring in communications and minoring in film. He says working on *The Blue Man* was more exciting than most films because, as a result of having all the former film students around, the conversations were more informed.

Like Mihalka, Pieter Kroonenburg also went to film school, the Amsterdam Film Academy. "The greatest benefit was that they gave the students a pass for free entry to the cinema houses, and we spent all our time watching movies."

Whereas Concordia University emphasizes practical experience, in Amsterdam teaching was more theoretical.

"My editing teacher tried to explain verbally what a 'clap' (as in clapboard) was. It

was rather ridiculous. No one knew what he was talking about."

Kroonenburg apprenticed with Joseph Losey as 2nd A.D. on *Modesty Blaise*. He then worked as a TV producer, a 1st A.D. on Italian Westerns, and finally he came to Canada with *The Lucky Star*, which he had been developing for five years.

"Canadian producer Claude Léger needed a film. He had the financing all arranged, but no film. *The Lucky Star* became that film, Max Fischer became the director, and I became line producer.

"But first Fischer had to marry his girlfriend in order to qualify as a Canadian. He had already been married about seven times and had women all over Europe. He said to me, 'My current girlfriend and I are getting along perfectly. I don't want to ruin a good relationship by getting married.' But he had little choice," Kroonenburg recalls.

"Now Max was born in Egypt. He was Jewish with a German father and an Italian mother. He was brought up in France and worked as a successful TV commercial director in Europe, but he wanted to direct a feature film," Kroonenburg elaborates.

"I told him, if you want to make the film, get married." Three days later he married his Iranian-Canadian girlfriend to qualify as "Canadian Content."

It is interesting to note that among Kroonenburg's classmates at film school, many are now working in the film industry, notably Paul Verhoeven, director of the rather bizarre Dutch feature *The 4th Man*.

"Verhoeven was very dry and studied mathematics. He suppressed his Calvinistic tendencies and was very uptight — you know, one of those people who go overboard much more when they finally do break out," Kroonenburg reminisces.

Another fellow student was actor Rutger Hauer, who appears with Harrison Ford in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*.

At the wrap party for *The Blue Man*, one experienced art director, who has worked in films for years and who had crashed the party when he heard music blaring from a Pointe St-Charles loft, marveled, "Everyone looks so young; this has to be one of the youngest crews I've seen."

"This was a very happy crew," Kroonenburg remarks. It's no secret that many of them worked for less money than on other pictures, but they wanted to work with George because they had either worked with him during his student days or on his first professional films. They even passed up other productions for this one because the image we created was that it would be an interesting film to do. There was such enthusiasm that everyone even came to the rushes.

"A producer's life is one of the most interesting things because you see how relationships work out to create a chemistry," says Kroonenburg. "As producer of *The Blue Man* I insisted on two key people with track records, cinematographer Paul Van der Linden, and editor Nick Rotundo. They weren't on George's list, but I wanted them because I believe you need people who will push each other to extremes to create the best work, people who don't pamper a director and just say 'yes' to him."

What all this expertise amounts to, though, is another question. Certainly *The Blue Man* is another example of the high professionalism of Canadian crews. As for how it translates onto the screen, here's hoping *Blue Man* is scheduled for release this Christmas.